

A Review of

**ART WORK: WOMEN ARTISTS AND DEMOCRACY IN
MID-NINETEENTH-CENTURY NEW YORK**

April F. Masten, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008)

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In *Art Work*, April Masten adds to a growing surge of historical interest in nineteenth-century women's art production.¹ Although many recent studies treat modes of production as well as aesthetics, "work" is clearly the focus of Masten's book. Attempting to combine the virtues of art, labor, and political history, the author sketches out a series of institutional histories that depict the rise of women artists to the rank of industrial professionals through design school training. She argues that it is largely their participation in, and acceptance into, the labor force that constitutes the "democracy" of the subtitle, but so does "art" as it was once expansively defined. The story goes something like this: with the advent of mechanical reproduction (photogravure, chromolithograph) in the mid-nineteenth-century, a huge and open market of cheap prints and reproductions—from the illustrated press to advertising campaigns—ruptured the control of genteel taste-making, putting art in the hands of a multitude and opening up the possibility of art careers to a wide number of Americans, male and female. For a generation, an apparent Valhalla of democratic work and democratic arts ensued.

Adding art grads' correspondence and design school applications to an abundant secondary literature, Masten illuminates a female world of cramped boarding houses and artist's studios within the "graphic arts district" of Lower Broadway, where women shared turf with cabarets, saloons, curiosity shops, and Barnum's American Museum. The terrain will be recognizable to readers of Christine Stansell's *City of Women* or James Cook's *Arts of Deception*, but Masten presents an unfamiliar world in her focus on the artist-as-laborer.² Like Kirsten Swinth's study of professional female painters, *Art Work* follows a trajectory of rising democratic professionalization (1870s-80s) followed by an exclusively gendered de-professionalization (1890s onward) upon the attainment of market maturity in the graphic arts and the adoption of corporate structuring by publishing houses and printworks. Both painters and printers were driven from the field, so long as they were women. But unlike Swinth's lady painters, governed by patronage and chance commissions, Masten's workers are wage earners—indeed, they are industrial

¹ See, e.g., Kirsten Swinth, *Painting Professionals: Women Artists and the Development of Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Laura R. Prieto, *At Home in the Studio: The Professionalization of Women Artists in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Laura Wexler, *Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Nina de Angeli Walls, *Art, Industry, and Women's Education in Philadelphia* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), covering the period 1848-1990s; F. Graeme Chalmers, *Women in the Nineteenth Century Art World: Schools of Design* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).

² Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987); James Cook, *Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). Joshua Brown's work on the illustrated press of the same era makes for a closer companion, although its focus is more on the political and social milieu of the artwork rather than the artists and their conditions. See Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

laborers—and this makes them democrats, or labor republicans anyhow. Summoning their motives, as well as the arc of the industrial art market, Masten declares, “economic ambition [circa 1870], not any particular genre or medium, made a woman artist a professional. That open definition would not apply to women artists twenty years later” (130).

Masten offers two crucial explanations for this shifting definition and for the rise and fall of the wage-earning woman artist: one might be deemed economic and the other art historical. Unlike in studies of women in the *fine arts*, for *Art Work*'s protagonists, economics mattered. Still largely middle-class, and fated to accept the prevailing domestic ideology of nineteenth-century culture, they were forced through a variety of circumstances to seek earnings in wage labor. Indeed, economic necessity, not domestic ideology, is the driving force for Masten's subjects (197-98). Agreeing with Swinth, she suggests the field of art “often represented the only possibility for paid work and ‘pride of independence’” (87). Indeed, but, as with all good laborers, there was more in it than simple pay. Sharing the ideal of art as a panacea with a broad coalition of reformers, philanthropists, and art critics, for Masten's industrial artists “[a]rt fever was not a young woman's disease, it was a possible remedy for the ills of industrial society” (89).³ Here Masten stresses a division between industrial labor of the mid-nineteenth-century and the mature, corporate stage it had attained by century's close.

One key point *Art Work* makes, on the basis of this chronology, is that early industrial society functioned less as an affliction to its workers than a forum for positive self-advancement. The submerged implication is that corporatization, not industrialization, has proved the true bugbear of art and labor alike. For this, Masten relies on a fairly utopian reading of Jacksonian America and early industrialism as a realm of pure democracy where the expectations and limits of class, gender, even notions of “genius,” (75-77) remained fluid and opportunistic. Emphasizing a sameness of masculine and feminine experience up through the mid-1870s, Masten reassures the reader that even the best-known male artists became famous and prosperous through arts other than fine arts (205, 215-16). Meanwhile, by mid-century female art school graduates regarded their training not as finishing school but rather as a sound moneymaking asset, downplaying their supposed ‘natural sympathy’ for art and the feminine ‘feeling for beauty,’ (80). Indeed, Masten takes pains to depart from the image of the dowdy middle-class amateur pursuing a hobby horse to depict a brawny, forthright workaday laborer in the art trade and, above all, to call that work art (82-83).

Seeking justification, Masten links design school principles and the bulk of her argument to a dubious aesthetic principle: the Ruskinian “Unity of Art” ideal, in which the aesthetics and economics of art are said to be fused and a sort of labor republicanism enjoyed (chap. 2). In Masten's reading, the English critic John Ruskin—with strong assists from Swedenborg, Carlyle, Fourier, and Greeley—effectively blasted the distinction of applied and fine arts, artisan and artist. Across the Atlantic, art mavens and industry leaders warmed to his applauding of the remunerative labor of the industrial artist as he, and now she, toiled in the fresh pastures of mechanical reproduction. Sketching the original union of Art and Industry, much of *Art Work* describes the process of art training for all common trades and the expansion of artistic labor, as Ruskin supposedly envisioned it, away from the traditional fine arts of painting, sculpture, and architecture.

³ On the link between art and social and educational reform, see especially Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Women's Culture: American Philanthropy and Art, 1830-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

There are two problems here, the first of which appears a deliberate misreading of Ruskin. The “Unity of Art” lecture from which Masten draws was not a bromide against fixation on the fine arts but rather a digression on painterly genius and an instruction to art teachers to pursue a single classical ideal of form and *not* encourage the attempt to unify the peculiar eclecticism of individual genius and technique (43). Even granting Masten’s interpretation, it is entirely unclear how strenuously this ideal was promoted, accepted, or put into practice, even though we are to allow that “[t]he artists, reformers, and entrepreneurs who provided women with art education and jobs at midcentury were the most egalitarian of democrats” (253). With the arts functioning as an apparent microcosm for Labor and Liberty, the fate of democracy, as much as women’s productive labor, comes to hinge on the “Unity of Art” ideal and how long it could hold out against the elitist refrain of “Art for Art’s Sake” that would prove so injurious to female professionals in the art world. It’s a neat, but troubled concept. Masten’s superior effort comes in working out the details and there is much here that is worthy of praise.

Some of Masten’s best work comes in providing a day-in-the-life depiction of the design academies—the National Academy and New York Schools of Design, and the Cooper Union especially—which factor so heavily in the radical shift in women’s art education from the domestic skills learned in female seminaries and improvement societies to wage employment in industrially based arts. For women, most particularly, the fine arts proved an elusive triumph, requiring exhibition, official reception, and indeterminate pay. “An Easier and Surer Path” was certainly had through such industrial (and in-demand) arts as illustration and etching; success, praise, popularity, and, above all, remuneration were the tantalizing fruits of publication and mass visibility and the numbers testify to the temptation (160-64). Masten estimates female art laborers accounted for perhaps one third of all featured artists in the new illustrated press, 1865-1889, and their story is well told here (172). In the very heart of this period of high female participation, however, the dynamic shifted, along with the economy, and Masten is forced to grapple with larger forces for an explanation, stepping once more onto shakier ground.

Too frequently she posits the union of women artists and workers at large not through women’s actual accounts or documented events—such as labor activism—but rather through indicators such as design school promotions and curricula, which were a function of marketing rather than lived experience (219). Of greater explanatory power seem the economic determinants over the political ones, though Masten is reluctant to emphasize this. Meanwhile, the conflation of artists and artisans appears, in large part, to be one of Masten’s own devising much like the “Unity of Art” ideal, which re-enters the debate at critical junctures. Masten suggests in her conclusion that the “Unity of Art ideal fought the degradation of labor, women, and American design as one battle, [losing] ground in 1877 when the republican values supporting Reconstruction gave way to a liberal capitalist ethos supporting industrial development” (250). This has the unfortunate effect of treating the idea of “Unity of Art” as a veritable force unto itself. It is no less problematic when people are made the actors, as Masten cloaks her art-industrial idealists in the richest political rhetoric: “Like eighteenth-century republicans, their moral philosophy and political economy were inseparable. They trained middle-class women to be working artists because they knew it was the right thing to do” (253).

By 1930, Masten claims that the full separation of Art and Industry, ideologically and materially, had been accomplished; the towering opportunity of decorative arts was by then shelved as a commercial endeavor with no artistic importance (215). In the meantime, the male beneficiaries of that brief flurry of Democratic Domestic Decorative Art, if I may, were to become again heroes of ‘serious’ art. Their foray

into feminine arts, even at the hour of indulgence, had never quite failed to disrupt the image Kathleen McCarthy casts of Winslow Homer: truly proud of his ceramic handiwork and gladly displaying his decorative tiles, albeit amid the laughter of the beer-swilling, fireside masculinity of the all-male Tile Club.⁴ The joke, it appears, was on the ladies, yet again. With art for art's sake, and not the worker's, women found a world of art works but no art work. Had democracy itself failed? That *Art Work* raises the question reveals there is much more in it than meets the eye; that it cannot justly answer, suggest there is also not quite enough.

⁴ McCarthy, *Women's Culture*, 65.